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Paintings of Husain

by

Ayaz S. Peerbhoy

✲

17 Colour Plates

10 Black & White Plates

✲

"A painter is surrounded by forms, natural and mechanical, but his memory on which he relies holds the experience, the distillate of forms, in essence and in physical relationship.

My paintings, drawings and the recent paper work has been directly influenced by my experience of traditional Indian dolls, paper toys — shapes galore. The experience of being with them, and the inspiration to create them are inseparable. A painter is a child in his purity of feeling — for only then he creates with authenticity of his being."

HUSAIN.

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Paintings of Husain

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To

Badrivishalji

From

Husain

and

Ayaz S. Peerbhoy

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"The Red Girl" '52 oils — size 4' × 2'
Collection: E. Schlesinger

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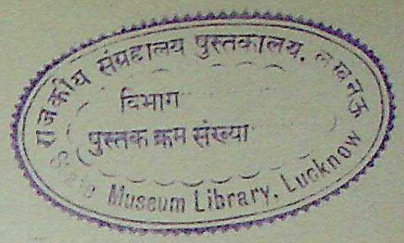

Paintings of Husain

by **Ayaz S. Peerbhoy**

"The painter does nothing other than gather and pass on what comes to him from the depths. He neither serves nor rules — he transmits! His position is humble, and the beauty of the crown is not his own. He merely is a channel."—PAUL KLEE.

THE likeness of the bison, stag, elephant and other animals which early man began to draw on walls with charcoal, a pointed stone and later with sharp metal, was the beginning of the first tangible expression of his idea communicated in the resemblance to the object. Such a representation of the animal form combined both the æsthetic as well as the communicative principle ; in fact the æsthetic was a part of the communicative element and therefore the aim was to achieve a likeness to the original. Drawing was an adjunct to language; for it extended the means of communication between people through easily recognisable visual symbols. The language of sound also developed and drawing became expressive and playful; besides the form of animals, it began to capture the mood, the behaviour. The art of painting was born.

Increase in the types of objects of drawing went hand in hand with a broadening of the needs of man. His experience was widened by the perception of new objects, making him conscious of newer aspects of nature. All this, he sought to express through his drawings. That, what he desired to communicate, was his knowledge of things and nature around him, their relation to himself and the community.

The language barrier limited the interchange of ideas, and it was therefore the function of a painter to break this barrier and convey to the people a feeling of the reality through 'things' — an attempt to discover the mystery in nature which is the soul of the parables.

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Early Indian art is illustrative of such inventiveness. It tells the story of the present and the world beyond. The psalms of the Vedas, as it were, take objective shape to become easily understandable. The feeling of the ultimate is made material, yet impersonal, so that man's knowledge is extended beyond the realm of things. The pantheon rises from the dust of the past and a sweeping world pulsating with life comes into existence. Reality becomes a parable.

From the time when man drew the first portrait of an animal till today, when one debates over Brancusi's *Bird In Flight* or ponders over the grotesqueness of Epstein's *Genesis* or Picasso's *Goat*, is the continuation of the story of the unfolding of man's consciousness. The limit of his perception has been broadened and he can now look at the changing landscape with a transcendental eye. What once appeared a mysterious, dark and frightening phenomenon is now illumined with knowledge. The mystery of the past is explained in symbols. The mysteries of nature have been captured in chemical formulas. Nature now exists in lines. Space gives to them the tension.

The understanding of modern art presupposes a going beyond the limits of objective consciousness. Modern art has been freed from the symbolical prison of written rules of beauty. A painter is no more bound to paint pleasant pictures to please his patrons he can paint to show "what he has found and not what he is looking for." In his findings, he may paint with a tragic sense or capture the individual torment, as Goya did, or paint a canvas of poignant sorrow as Picasso has done in *Guernica*. Husain's *Man* is born of such a realisation of human crisis. When looking at a contemporary painting, therefore, one has to penetrate into the unconscious of the painter to become aware of its contents.

Modern art is a continuation of art-history. A progress into time that has changed its purpose, and endowed art with an ego — the personality of the painter. To paint then was to mirror nature. Now, it is an expression of the relationship the painter establishes with the objective world. Known objects to him may appear as an experience of form, of line and colour, reflecting light in space.

"*How can you expect an onlooker to live a picture of mine as I have lived it? A picture comes to me from miles away; who is to say from how far away I sensed it, saw it, painted it; and yet the next day I can't see what I have done*

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myself. How can anyone enter into my dreams, my instincts, my thoughts, which have taken a long time to mature and to come out into the daylight, and above all grasp from them what I have been about—perhaps against my own will?"—PICASSO.

HUSAIN was born in Indore, a State in Central India which survived as a hangover of the feudal autocracy. The British had indulged the rulers into becoming pompous and decadent nababs; without any real power, the rulers mostly revelled in petty intrigue and romance. It was in such an exotic atmosphere that Husain struggled to become a painter.

A hundred miles from Indore lie the old cities of Mandu and Ujjain, where the relics of old Jain art smoulder in their past glory. These old temples are an unending source of inspiration. They beaconed Husain beyond their seeming appearance to where lived, in immortal glory, the creators of the masterpieces of art.

Outside Indore, Indian nationalism was rising and moving towards independence. Gandhiji was the miracle of the epoch—saint and politician, the embodiment of national thought. His concept of passive resistance had aroused the people. His weapons were simple, the charka and Swadeshi. Swadeshi was both a political weapon and a *sadhana* of self-purification, thus it became the slogan of the day. The revivalists came into fashion and in the name of Swadeshi, presented copies of classical work as national art. On the other hand, students of Anglo-Indian schools, under the direction of British teachers, copied Western academicians and found favour with the ruling class. The call to give India back to Indians, drowned every other sound. India could become Indian by moving back into the past—for that alone was authentic.

Such were the days when Husain started out as a designer of movie sets. In his spare time he played with colour and brush, copying the masters. The whole process appeared too strange to him and though he was working to be a good movie designer, something was drawing him towards painting. He, however, continued to work as a set designer, and eked out a bare existence. But inner tension

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slowly reached breaking point. At last, he took a decisive step and migrated to Bombay. Painting is a luxury. One who is devoted and dedicates himself to it with passion must face privation. Husain lived on a small income—to him painting was the beginning and the end.

III

AS a child Husain was enamoured of dolls—the little home-made forms, in wood or clay, colourful and simple like the village folk themselves. The fascination for these toys grew beyond a childish fancy into a curious affection. They were not mere shapes, but represented a world of his joys and sorrows. The world of his childhood dream had become alive, reflecting the varied moods of its creator playful but poignantly aware of the life beyond.

The atmosphere in the home was orthodox and austere. His father worked in a textile mill and led a devoted existence. He wanted the boy to be a down-to-earth honest man, a good father and a good husband. Husain nurtured all these ideals, out of obedience to his elders, accepted mediocrity as a virtue of essential goodness.

Early influences, which built the spirit of Husain, the man, were the traditional Urdu poets. The man who accepts mediocrity as a virtue becomes drawn to an inner life. Specially one who has a sensitive soul and who respects his elders is not likely to revolt, but to move within himself, as it were, to lead a dual life. This inward journey is a way of compromise, a balancing of duties with intimate fancy. One, is for the outside world of illusion and the other for the self of poignant reality.

Husain spent his leisure moments reading romantic Urdu poetry and found in them a relief from the bondage of routine life. Iqbal the poet, the philosopher, the mystic and the agnostic, influenced Husain. His poetry was a challenge to material barriers. Heart of the matter was the thing. And in search of the heart, Poet Iqbal, like Anatole France, led the revolt of the angels against God, to unseat the usurper from the throne of the Absolute.

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Have you, the Compassionate, the Merciful,
Ever turned to us!
We who elevated Thee, and made Thee
Master of all worlds: Even So,
You created us with weaknesses and
Endowed us with cowardice!

And, intoxicated with the arrogance of his poetic flight, Iqbal burst forth "Raise thine own-self to such perfection that even He would consult thine true wishes!" The planner of the toy world became the master of himself; the painter and the poet, both, had touched the chords of transcendental music. This, was the inner existence where compromise had no place. The glory of man is eternal when he is true to himself.

IV

HUSAIN went through the usual grind of an art school and settled down to becoming a painter of pleasant portraits. His portraits were flattering to his sitters and showed great respect for academic standards. But within him lay the seeds of dissatisfaction — somewhere inside, discontent was gnawing into him.

Life in a city is a great strain upon a painter. With the wheels of industry moving faster and faster sweeping both men and material into an unending whirl of commercial life, a painter is forgotten. He gets lost in a material fight. The grind of city life is hard and the sublime indifference of people almost callous. Husain was both a man and a painter. Bombay was a new world and there were many other worlds beyond Bombay. So Husain went to Delhi to see the exhibition of independent India. Here he was face to face with Mathura sculpture along with it was also exhibited the modern sculpture. The two worlds taut with their creative sensitivity stood in a miracle of space. They were separated by a knowledge of time but both moved towards the same goal of primordial manifestation.

Husain now began to analyse the content of form, its structure, line and volume, the inner energy that pushed them into existence the mind beyond the reality.

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"*Art has to attain the exact equilibrium through the creation of pure plastic means composed in absolute oppositions. In this way the two oppositions (vertical and horizontal), are in equivalence, that is to say, of the same value.*"—PIET MONDRIAN.

HUSAIN'S paintings show a keen sense of design. This he has inherited from his early pre-occupation with calligraphy. Like the old masters, Husain devoted himself to calligraphy as this was the grammar and essence of design. Behzad, who founded the Moghul school in India, was a calligrapher ; he set the standard for powerful drawing and accurate draftsmanship. The vigorous strokes in his early work are a positive indication of his strength in drawing and mastery of line. Design is a balance of two contradictory lines, the vertical and the horizontal. By balancing of these lines is achieved the architectonic arrangement of space.

Husain's paintings of the post-Delhi period are reminiscent of the toys which were his childhood companions, but created on a different level of consciousness. The dolls have grown into full maturity and shed their clay bodies, to become a pattern of colour harmony. The colours are bold and contrasted in a balance to deepen the mystery of form.

Delhi was the crucial point. It changed Husain's outlook and launched him into a search of new realms of reality. He made friends with Cezanne and Matisse. Cezanne gave him a deeper insight into composition and taught him to see objects in their own surroundings, where they breathe and live. It is a basis of the authentic, dynamic creative impulse which makes a work of art truly artistic. Matisse himself was a revolutionary, who flattened colour to make lines dramatically expressive. His inspiration was Japanese prints. Like Gauguin, he was attracted by the bold colour patches of the tropics. Strong light and deep shadows emphasise colour in their natural setting and fill the living with a radiant joy or cast upon them an aura of exotic mystery.

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"*It is the creation of a suggestive magic containing at once the object and the subject, the world outside the artist and the artist himself.*"—BAUDELAIRE.

THE early experiments in new style dazzled both painter and his friends. Husain was not yet master of the new idiom. He was still playing with memories of childhood playthings, of robing them in different colours to make them gay with the joy of living, or sombre and shadowed with the burden of mundane life. The painter had not reached a oneness with his work where the creator and the created are indentified with the spirit of creation. Perhaps the frustration of his childhood days was the barrier that kept him from touching the spring of creativity, from pouring into a painting the essence of his total experience.

Husain's paintings fall into three categories — the *Beginning* — the *Strife* and the *Verge*. The Beginning is an outpouring of a colourful pageantry, of fairy dreams touching the hard core of life.

From academic to 'free' is a swing, where rules do not police the conscience of the painter, either in form or colour mixing. The first period of Husain has gaiety freely flowing with an expressive ecstacy; the colour patches give birth to form and cover the canvas, balanced by their intensity. The early palette places darker colours in areas of shadows, giving to them a feeling of sombreness and sorrow.

Husain's sensitivity touches outward manifestations and in breaking with the traditions of the past, he is only creating new ones, to experience the objects in a mood of contemporary awareness. No attempt is made to burden the painting with a message, the content is a part of the whole scheme, as colour is a part of the form.

The form comes to life with line. The deep confident line seeks to enclose reality in search of eternity. He is striving to unfold his complete personality and pour it out into the canvas. But Husain has reached a point in his recent work where he is on the verge of touching something that is beyond himself. Lines are confident and the figure studies a part of the whole pattern. There is an interplay of line and colour which simplifies the form and captures the sculpturesque feeling.

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On his return from Europe recently, Husain said " Line is a virile force with keen latent mobility, which in spite of being imperceptible in nature, is constantly striving to assert itself. These are qualities which can be observed only by the intensity of colour — the intensity that marked the works of Van Gogh and also to some extent, those of Emil Nolde, Mark and a few other German Expressionists. Paul Klee successfully synthesised all these forces and qualities, which he embodied in a number of amazing creations which will stand the test of time for many years to come."

His experience of line is contained in *Pamosh*. This is a linear composition balanced by four lines — each figure representing a vertical line, balanced by a single horizontal line. In this, there is the entire story of the three Indian classical characters. According to technical critics who have learned to assess modern art by comparison, the figure treatment in this canvas is influenced by Italian artists — Mondigliani and Mario Marini. Does it matter that the treatment has a similarity in history of art? What really matters is that the style is not apart from its content, that one does not depend upon the other.

On the verge of a new chapter in his painting, Husain is acquiring a control over different mediums, from brush to pen and pen to charcoal or nail and now paper cuts. His creativity lies in the co-ordination of hand and mind — for the tradition of India's greatness was created by such a co-ordination and it is for Husain to enrichen Indian art by creating art of contemporary greatness.

The joy of a painter's life is in work itself. When he can tear himself away from family responsibilities, to plunge into the depths of creation and seek that poetic joy which is both enriching and ennobling.

Husain lives with his family in a small apartment. He paints in an improvised little attic. When he climbs to that attic he reaches another world, where everything else ceases to exist. Only, that which he is going to create can exist. Only his consciousness with multi-impressions exists.

In this little attic Hussain is busy creating one of the greatest paintings of life. An eighteen feet long mural on canvas in oil entitled " *Village Life*". The mural is descriptive of a village panorama, sweeping the horizon with its multi-consciousness of life both bizarre and sublime.

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"Mirror" '49 oils — size $3\frac{1}{2}' \times 2\frac{1}{2}'$

Collection: E. Schlesinger

With playful simplicity, form is subordinated to colour. Yellow touches the fringe of childish curiosity.

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"Woman with Bird"
Woodcut

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" Portrait of W. H." '51 oils
size 18" × 16"

Collection: Wayne Hartwel

This is the first portrait after transition from academic to free. The form is distilled to bring out the mood.

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" Parrot " '50 oils — size 10" × 16"

Collection : E. Schlesinger

The early influence of expressionists is clearly visible. A playful fantasy expressed as poetry in colour.

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"Balance"
Pen and Ink

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"Women At Work" '50 oils
size 14" × 19"
Collection: E. Schlesinger

The first milestone in the work of Husain when line and colour begin to acquire harmony in a rhythmic expression of the lullaby.

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" Self-Portrait " '50 oils — size 3' × 2'
Collection : E. Schlesinger
Self-Portrait — the palette is very interesting for the painter has given to himself some very sombre colour touches, perhaps symbolical of the sorrow in his soul.

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"The Pull" '52
oils—size 48" × 48"

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"Man" '51 oils — size 4' × 8'

Man — won him admiration from friends and critics. This is an analytical work, bringing to the surface the psychosis which has torn the man from his happy home and hurled him into a conflict. Here colours express a new emotion, with dark colours emphasising the evil in the nature of man. Colour and symbols are the contents of the conflict — man dreams of destroying before creating.

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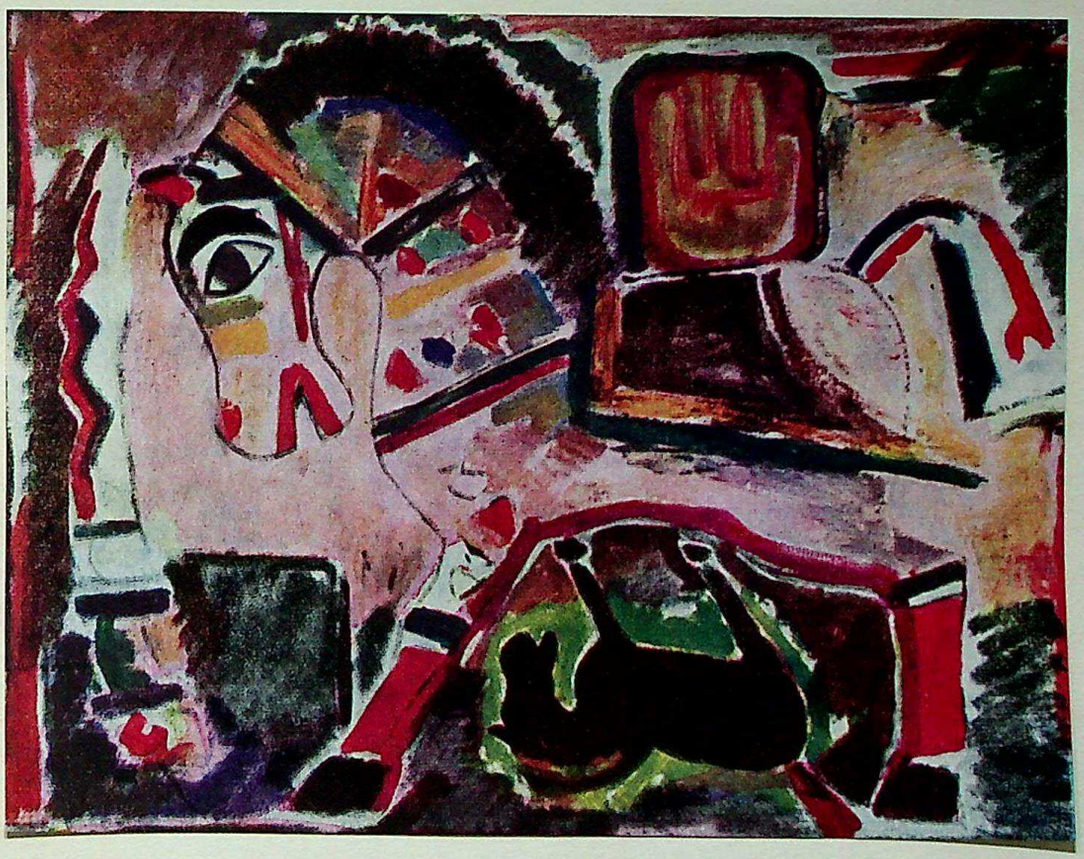

" Dul Dul " '51 oils — size 30" × 36"
Collection : E. Schlesinger

Dul Dul — this animal form, very reminiscent of the toy horse of Indore, is packed with a religious significance. It has an emotional impact very much similar to the Nandi bull. For this animal served " Husain " in a battle of right vs. wrong. This painting is a bridge to the new trend and development of Husain, for line now begin to enclose the form and begins to assert itself in search of the essential element.

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"The Fortune Bird"
Pen and Ink.

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" Drummer " '53 water-colour
size 18" × 10"

Colour predominates but the flat patches are giving way to a new simplicity of form. Here Husain has packed movement, with certain theatrical gesture.

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" Bullock Cart " '54 Ink and Water-colour
size 18" × 10"

Husain's drawing of animals is most interesting. Here he has got the animals in motion against a static landscape. There is a deliberate attempt to leave colour bubbles on the paper, to give a feeling of sky.

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"Banana Seller" '52
Oils — size 12" × 8"

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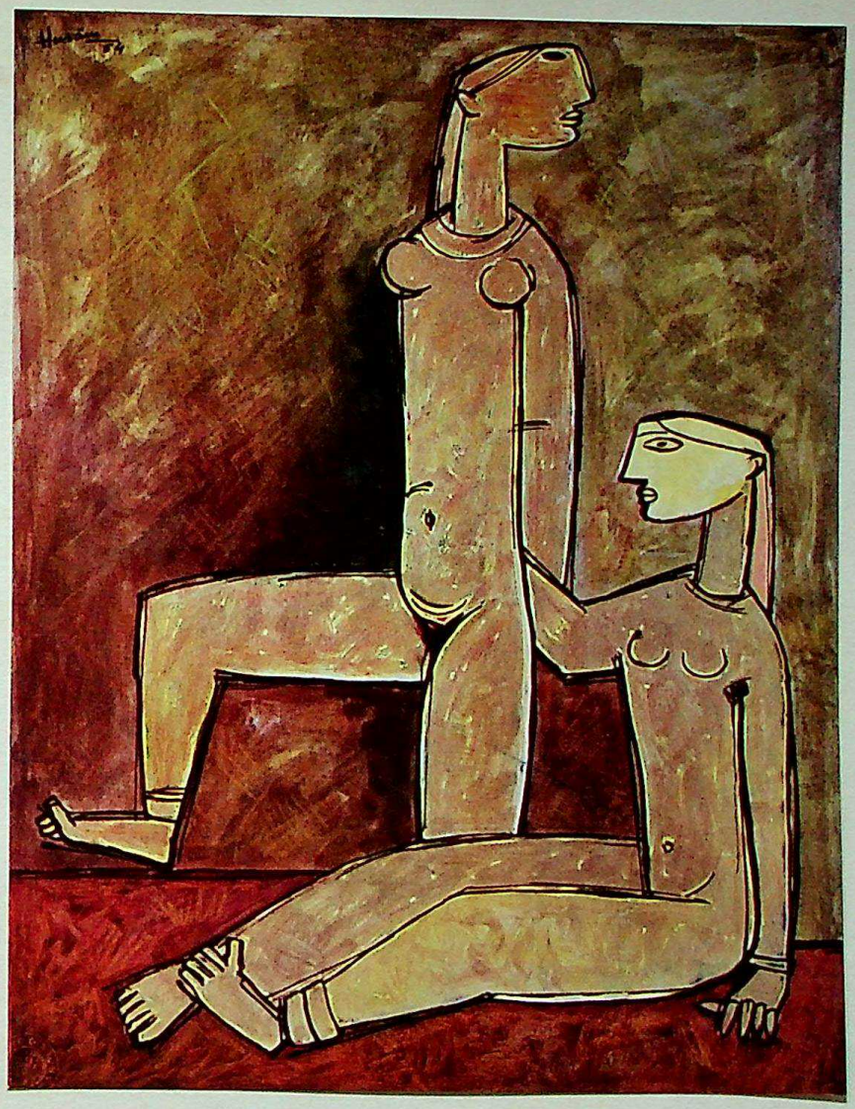

" Golden Sisters " '54 — size 18" × 10"

Collection : Sri Badrivishalji

Here for the first time, since his return from Paris, is seen the influence of Italian painters. The elongated form with tendencies for straight lines reflects the contemporary trend in the Italian school.

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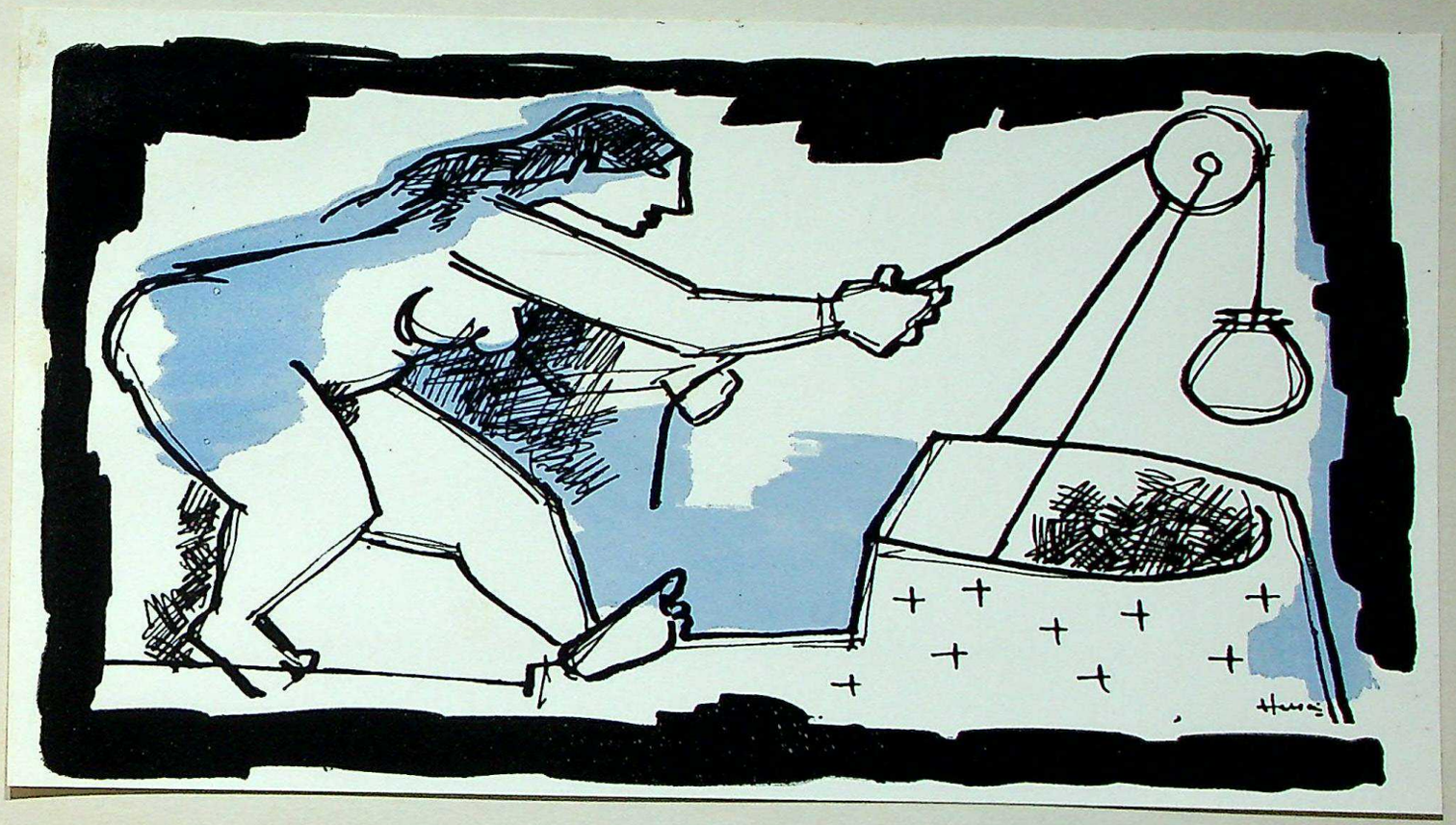

"At The Well" '54 Pen and Ink.
This is a playful sketch done with great simplicity but prepares the ground for his "line work."

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"The Palm" '54
Gouache — size 18" × 10"

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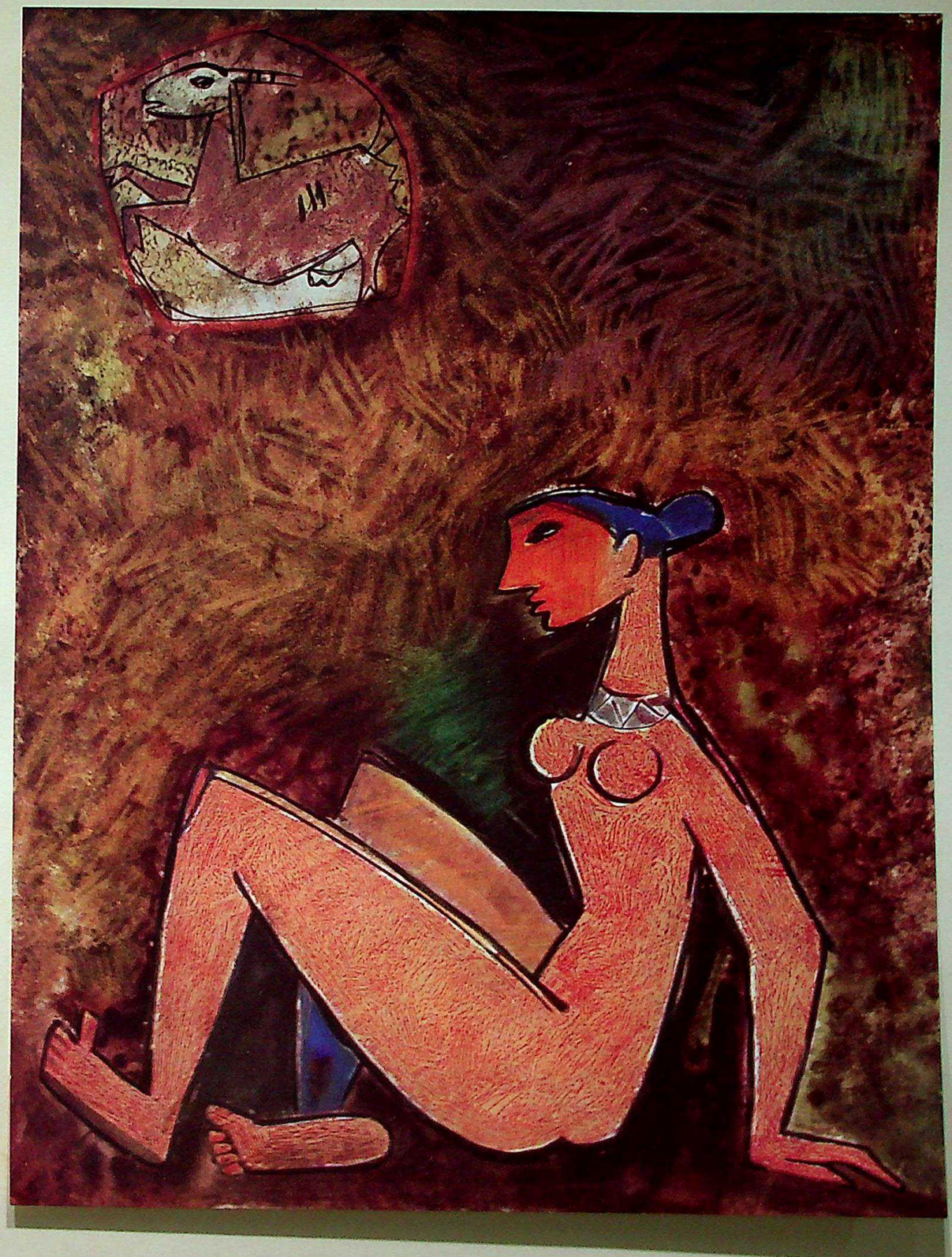

"Girl With a Goat"
Ink and Water-colour — size 18" × 10"

The nude is placed in a different setting. The emphasis is on ascetic approach with texture giving a certain rugged austerity to sensuousness.

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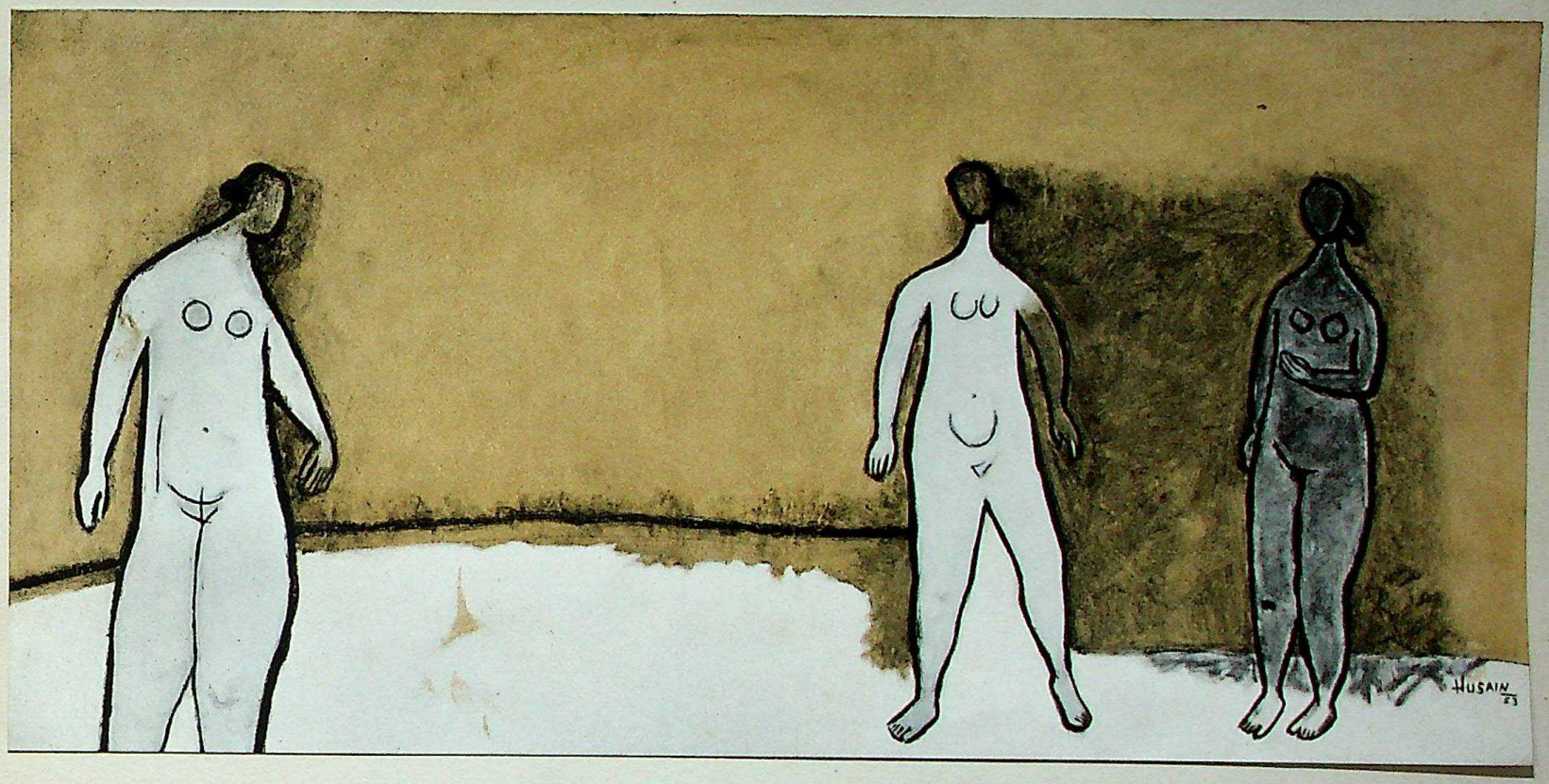

"Pamosh" oils — size 40" × 20"
Collection: Ayaz Peerbhoy

A linear composition balanced by four lines—each figure representing a vertical line balanced by a single horizontal line. The lines here become expressive and capture the mood of the three Indian mythological figures.

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"Mural" '52
oils — size 40" × 38"

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"Red Apple" Paper — size 12" × 10"
With paper cuts he appears to be moving towards abstraction. Here he has tried to capture motion.

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"Landscape" Paper — size 24" × 18"
Coloured kite paper is put into form to express his new experience of simplification of an idea.

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"Lotus Girl" '51
size 72" × 30"
Drawing with distemper on hessian

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"Woman Spinning"
Paper — size 14" × 12"
Collection: Ayaz Peerbhoy

Husain has now branched out into a new line. This is born out of village practise of preparing paper toys. The whole painting is brought into existing by pasting thin coloured paper.

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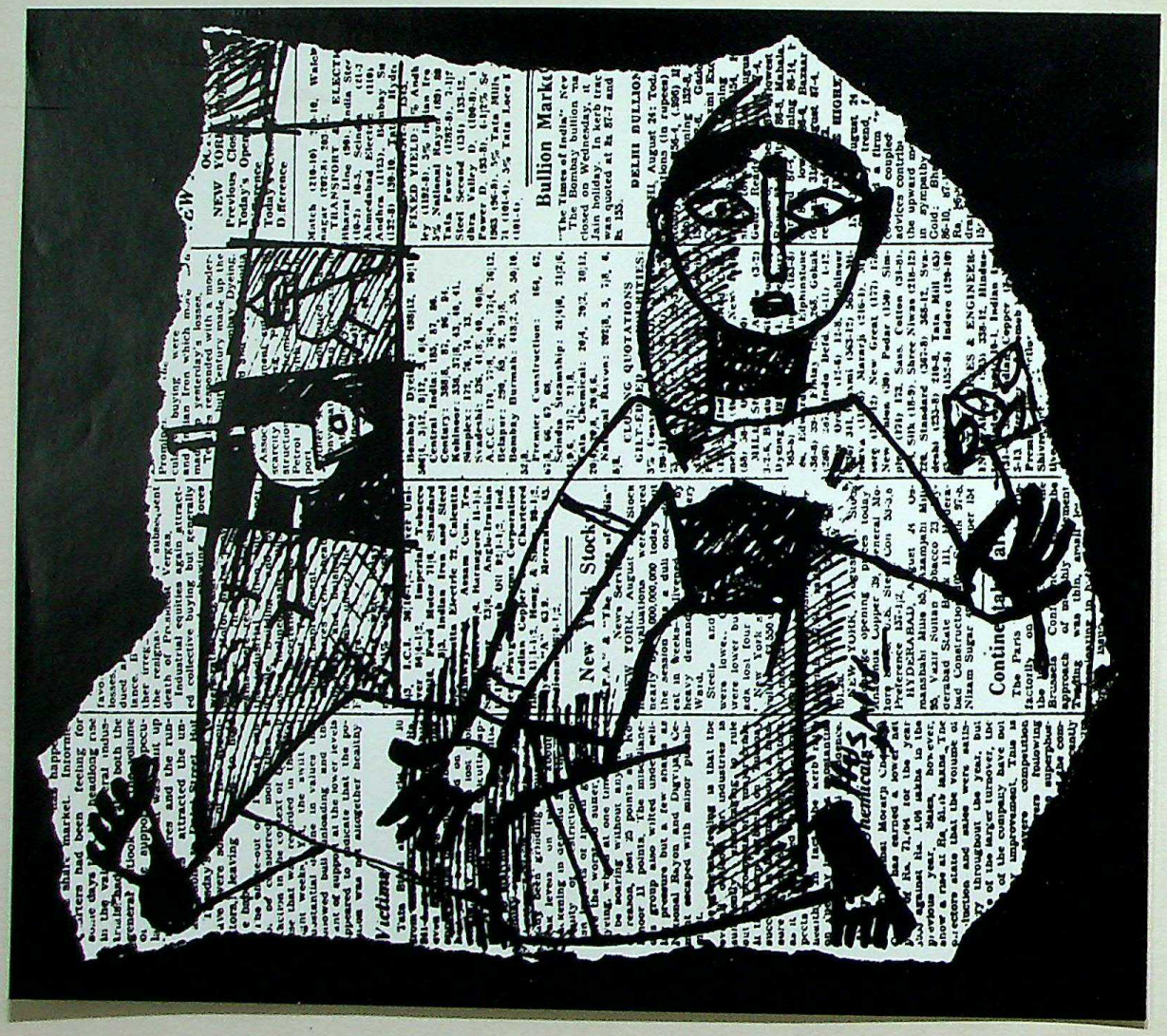

Flo-master on Newspaper

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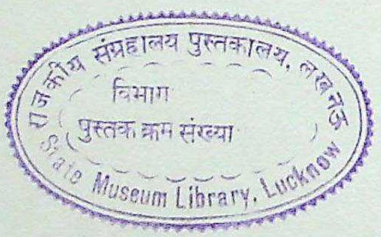

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Paintings of Husain

"Maqbul Fida Husain appeared very suddenly on the Bombay Art scene some five years ago. He startled friend and foe alike with a very personal style of painting which the critics have likened to certain work of the German Expressionists between 1910 and 1930. He insists on strong kaleidoscopical colours, often playing black or white against the richer tones of the palette. By Naturalistic standards, his forms and drawing are distorted ; they conform to patterns which his colour dictates. Why he does so, nobody and least of all the artist could explain in rational terms. You will either see it yourself or condemn his work. There have been people who started with the latter ended up with living happily with Husain's paintings all over the house. They have an emotional contents that emanates gradually, like the smell of good wood. He paints people, who are his neighbours, and sometimes his thoughts and comments on this not too perfect world."

R. V. Leyden.

UP State Museum, Lucknow

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State Museum, Lucknow